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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings of a case study of the education of second language learners in a middle school of approximately 2,000 students undergoing middle school reform in California. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by a school experiencing rapid demographic changes in a predominantly working-class community of a large urban school district. During three site visits, a representative sample of teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents were interviewed on the impact of second-language learners, types of instructional services provided, and noninstruction support provided to students and their families. Interviews were transcribed and coded for computerized analysis. It was found that teachers expressed positive views about second-language learners and altered their language use for these students, although cultural diversity was viewed more as a problem than as an opportunity. It was found that student content knowledge was more likely to increase as competence in English-language skills improved. Findings also confirmed positive relationships between home and school, although administrators were more positive than teachers. (Contains 11 references.)
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Second-Language Learners and Middle School Reform

A Case Study of a School in Transition

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1995

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Second-Language Learners and Middle School Reform

A Case Study of a School in Transition

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Abstract

This report presents the findings of a case study of the education of second language learners in a middle school undergoing middle school reform. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by a middle school experiencing rapid demographic changes while attempting to implement key elements of middle-level reform. The school, serving grades 6–8, was located in a predominantly working-class community of a large urban school district. In recent years, the school has experienced a significant growth in enrollment of second-language learners who comprise two-thirds of the school's overall enrollment of 2,000 students. Most of these students are of immigrant background and are poor.

During three site visits, we interviewed a representative sample of teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents. Questions included the impact of second-language learners on the school, types of instructional services provided, and noninstructional supports to students and their families. Interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed qualitatively.

The following observations are highlighted in the report. Teachers expressed positive views about second-language learners and altered their use of language to make instruction more comprehensible to these students. As second-language learners gained competence in English-language skills, they were more likely to gain greater access to content knowledge. Moreover, students in the "advanced" classes had greater access to challenging content matter. Although the school staff had created a positive school climate for all students, there was no visible recognition of the strengths that second-language learners bring to the classroom. For example, the primary language of the students was not used in the instructional process. Students at the beginning levels of

English as a second language (ESL) were less likely to receive career counseling or exploration services. Finally, the relationship between home and school was generally positive. Parents have been incorporated into the life of the school in many ways, and there was a mechanism for communicating parent concerns and desires to the school leadership. The report contains policy recommendations for action at the district and school levels.

Second-Language Learners and Middle School Reform: A Case Study of a School in Transition

In the past decade, many schools in the United States have experienced significant increases in enrollment of children who are second-language learners. This growth has contributed to the linguistic and ethnic diversity reflected in today's public school classrooms. Although most second-language learners are enrolled in elementary schools, several reports have noted significant growth in the population of these students in middle and high schools (Lucas, 1992; Minicucci & Olsen, 1992). In California, the site of the present study, enrollments of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in secondary schools have increased by 42 percent in a period of three years (Minicucci & Olsen, 1992).[1]

At the local level, schools are trying to cope with the educational challenge posed by these students. With limited personnel and financial resources, schools must design instructional responses that appropriately address the needs of students from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. Moreover, within the major language groups, there is a great deal of diversity. For example, Spanish speakers, who constitute two-thirds of all non-English-language speakers in the school system, include different nationalities and racial/cultural groups. Some of the more recent immigrants have very little prior schooling experience. Educators ask themselves how they will provide services to these students and at the same time institute middle-level and high school reforms. At the middle and high school levels, a complicating factor is that these students must learn the second language and acquire content knowledge within a relatively short period of time.

A Look at the Research

The research base on successful instruction of second-language learners in middle schools is limited. Researchers have contributed articles and research reports on effective practices at this level, but few studies have examined the degree to which these practices are incorporated in classrooms with significant numbers of students with LEP.[2] Consequently, educators, policymakers, and researchers do not have a firm understanding of how the educational status and characteristics of these students relate to classroom practices.

The few studies that have examined the in-school experience of adolescents enrolled in the middle and high school levels found that many students with LEP are at-risk of school failure or of dropping out. In a study of high school students in Dade County, Florida, Portes and Gran (1991) concluded that students with LEP had lower levels of performance and dropped out more frequently than other students. Rumbaut (1990) analyzed the reading and math achievement of secondary students with LEP in the San Diego public schools and found that across language groups, students characterized as LEP and FEP scored below their peers in reading and vocabulary achievement tests. Another study of Vietnamese secondary school students enrolled in the same school district noted that although many of these students are successful, many others drop out of school (Davis & McDaid, 1992).

Studies that have focused on how schools respond to second-language learners enrolled in middle schools and high school have found gaps in the academic learning of these students. For example, Minicucci and Olsen (1992) found that few schools are able to provide second-language learners with access to the full core curriculum content.

Many reports have noted that the economic well being of the United States hinges on the ability of our schools to produce a well-educated work force. Because students with a language-minority background will comprise a significant proportion of the nation's work force, improving learning opportunities and achievement outcomes of second-language learners in middle schools is critical. This imperative has been acknowledged in recent federal education legislation that calls for the inclusion of all students in emerging state content and performance standards.[3]

This study presents the results of site visits conducted in an urban middle school undergoing rapid demographic change in its student population. The purpose of the visits was to document teachers' views and perceptions regarding second-language learners, gain an understanding of challenges faced by the school staff as it attempted to improve services to these students, and understand how a school attempts to deepen its middle school reform efforts and simultaneously respond to the rapid increase of second-language learners.

The findings are expected to contribute to our understanding of middle-level school improvement by highlighting the complexities and challenges of middle-level reforms in settings with large numbers of second-language learners. More important, these findings should inform policy discussion about middle-level school improvement currently taking place at the national, state, and local levels.[4] With few exceptions, leaders of the middle-level reform movement have given little attention to particular conditions, needs, and strengths of second-language learners. If we do not consider the barriers faced by many students with LEP, we will not realize the objectives of middle school reform efforts—or those of the broader standards-based reform movement.

School Site

Vista Middle School[3] serves students enrolled in grades 6, 7, and 8. It is located in a large urban district on the West Coast. In 1991, the enrollment at the school was 1,615; within a two-year period (by 1993), the enrollment increased by 20 percent to approximately 2,000 students. The changes have resulted in a multiethnic, multilingual student population that is 20 percent white, 27 percent Hispanic, 27 percent Indochinese, 26 percent African American, and 3 percent Asian and Pacific Islander. Most of the students are of language-minority background; and within this general population there are a significant number of second-language learners. The students classified as LEP represent about one half of all students at the school. These students place certain demands on the school's staff that are different from those of native speakers of English or English speakers from a language-minority background. These demands not only stem from the students' lack of English-language proficiency but are also complicated by students' low-income background—75 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches.

Vista Middle School is undergoing a process of middle school reform that has resulted in structural changes such as interdisciplinary team teaching, student advisories, block scheduling, exploratory classes, and common planning periods. Also, to accommodate the high enrollment of immigrant students, the school has adopted a year-round schedule. The school is attempting to improve teaching and learning by using innovative programs, such as Writing to Learn and the Stanford University Teacher Curriculum series. It has also engaged the staff in intensive staff development aimed at improving outcomes for its student population. Like many schools in the district, it has also been

implementing aspects of a school-based management philosophy that gives schools greater decision-making latitude in the types of staff development activities in which teachers participate and in the purchase of supplementary instructional materials. All these reforms create an environment that promotes positive outcomes for students.

The school was a desirable school in which to conduct a case study because it is confronting challenges that are similar to those encountered by other middle schools attempting to serve a highly diverse student population. Therefore, the observations resulting from the site visit might be relevant and useful to other schools. Also, documentation of current practices and challenges can be useful to the district and the school staff as they prepare to implement new strategies for serving students characterized as LEP and FEP.

Data Collection

The data for this study consisted of transcripts of taped interviews, notes taken during classroom observations, school documents, district documents, and field notes. The visits were conducted during the months of November 1993 and February 1994. Each visit to the school lasted for approximately two and a half days, for a total of five days. In preparation for the school visit, we met with district personnel and the school's English-as-a-second-language (ESL) director. In addition, we collected information about district policies and practices bearing on the education of second-language learners.

Based on a review of research literature on the education of second-language learners, we developed a series of interview protocols for ESL teachers, mainstream content area teachers, the principal, counselors, and parents. During the first visit to the school, in November 1993, we interviewed the school principal, ESL coordinator, parents, and several mem-

bers of the ESL instructional team. The interviews were half an hour in duration, and most were audiotaped. The interview questions served as a general guide to the types of issues raised during the interviews. However, the topic of discussion with the teachers and other personnel shifted, depending on the issues raised during the interview. Thus, the organizing themes were not always those that we had initially expected to come out of the interview process. We also observed several ESL, sheltered[6], and mainstream classrooms. Most of the observations lasted for less than one class period (half an hour). Teachers were previously advised of the classroom visits.

The findings and observations outlined here are based on interviews of a selected number of school and district-level staff, including 15 ESL teachers, 19 mainstream teachers, 4 counselors, 3 members of the administrative staff, and 3 parents. They were interviewed as members of their respective interdisciplinary teams and represented all grade levels. During the first site visit, we interviewed district-level staff only. During the second site visit, we interviewed five teams of ESL teachers. Three teams were teaching students who had been placed in the upper end of the ESL sequence (in the advanced, or "bridge" class); in the other two teams, teachers were assigned to ESL classes at the beginner and intermediate levels. During the third and last site visit, we interviewed four mainstream teacher teams. The observations pertaining to teachers' views do not represent all teachers at Vista. Moreover, within the teams, individual teacher opinion varied. Whenever it was possible to report teacher responses by ESL and non-ESL category, we presented these responses in the discussion of the findings.

Data Analysis

Interviews with instructional teams or individual members of the school staff were transcribed and prepared for indexing

using the computer software program the Ethnograph. Although the questions used during the interviews served as an initial list of categories, we developed the final set of categories for the study by reading through each transcript and identifying general patterns (topics) that seemed to repeat themselves or stand out across all interviews. This process resulted in the development of a set of codes used to classify chunks of the interview data. The data and the analysis reported here are not generalizable to all middle schools undergoing restructuring or middle schools with high numbers of second-language learners. Rather, they represent the views of a selected group of teachers and staff that are attempting to build structures and establish instructional processes that promote higher levels of achievement among students.

Findings of the Qualitative Analysis

The following patterns emerged from the data-analysis process. The categories incorporate teachers' views of second-language learners and reflect the processes of instruction in place at Vista.

Teachers expressed positive views about second-language learners.

With few exceptions, the teachers interviewed noted that they wanted to work with second-language learners. These feelings were expressed by both ESL teachers and non-ESL teachers. Second-language learners are described as bright and capable, anxious to learn the language and culture of their new country, and hard working. For example, one teacher described the population as follows:

> They've learned good study habits and good skills and follow through. They've got the family structure with brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles that will come in and help. They will sit down in the kitchen and work with the family. Mom or dad doesn't know this, but the cousin next door knows it. So they'll come in and there's just a mutual support system there...

While the teachers felt positive about working with second-language learners, some felt the student's limited English proficiency or lack of background knowledge creates an ambivalence about what these young people can accomplish academically and how far in their educational career they can go. For example, a few teachers felt that it was unrealistic to expect all (or a substantial number) of the second-language learners to go to college because of the amount that these students need to acquire in terms of literacy skills and background knowledge; they pointed to the students' family backgrounds, high college cost, and the greater difficulty of getting into college than in the past. One seventh-grade teacher felt that although her students "were

bright and capable…they do not have the vocabulary to go on to college."

Others perceived the lack of motivation and immaturity as a barrier to students' ability to go to college. This perception was particularly the case among a few of the mainstream teachers.[7] One of these teachers noted, "Out of 100, 30 could make it or have the ability to make it to college," or "I would say there are 30 that will be lucky to get out of high school." However, another teacher within the same team disagreed and was more philosophical about his students' achievement: "I think individuals mature at different levels within the time frame of life. I think a lot of our students could be college bound at 19 or 22, after they get more mature, disciplined, more responsible."

Many more teachers felt that compared with the "regular kids," second-language learners are more likely to go to college, but they have a lot of catching up to do. This latter group of teachers made comments such as: "I would say that a lot of my kids are Gifted and Talented (GATE) material." A few teachers felt that a major role of the middle school is to help young adolescents assume responsibility for their education so that they can get through high school. Thus, there ought to be less concern about college and more emphasis on helping them mature to get ready for high school, where presumably the real challenge will be met.

This latter comment reflects an issue that, although not fully explored during the visit, merits further study and analysis. There seems to be ambivalence among the staff about the overall mission of middle-level education. Several of the teachers seemed to place less emphasis on the academic objectives because they viewed the middle school as a place for preparing students emotionally; that the more difficult academic challenge was at the high school level. Others viewed middle-level education as the key to the long-term success of the student and therefore favored a strong academic emphasis.

Teachers are cognizant that language use in the classroom must be altered to make it comprehensible to their students, and they incorporate strategies designed to achieve this goal.

The school's ESL department is held in high regard by the staff of the school and the central office. This is because it provides its students with a sequential, coordinated English-language development experience, and its leadership is capable and knowledgeable of the range of issues bearing on the education of students with LEP. Students entering the program are grouped by English-language proficiency levels. As the students progress from the beginning ESL classes (1-2) to the advanced ESL classes (5-6, Bridge), they are enrolled in more academically and linguistically demanding content classes. These levels represent increasing complexity in linguistic functioning, from listening and speaking to reading and writing.

In a school that is composed primarily of second-language learners, teachers would be expected to make adjustments in how instruction is provided to these students, and these adjustments would depend on the level of English-language competence of the students and their prior knowledge of the content. This is the case at Vista, where many of the teachers already have earned their Language Development Specialist (LDS) certificate, have received on-site training on second-language teaching techniques, or have registered for the LDS.[8] Teachers in ESL and mainstream classrooms reported that language is modified in complexity and content to make it understandable to students, and that it's done in a variety of ways. For example, a seventh-grade teacher said he uses the program "Hooked on Phonics" to help students with pronunciation. Others talked about "simplification" of language, as follows:

> [I use] antonyms, synonyms for the words they don't know and build on their vocabulary...

> If I were to use a word that would be above their level, then I would break that word down and rephrase what I'm saying.

Such effective second-language teaching techniques were evident during visits to ESL classrooms. Teacher talk in these classrooms was explicit, and the second language was modeled frequently for the students through repetition of key words or phrases. The activities around which the language lesson was designed were usually linked to a meaningful experience for students. For example, one lesson focused on a trip the students had taken to the zoo. Teachers noted that they do not solely rely on language to enhance student learning; they used visuals, active teaching methods, cooperative learning, and demonstrations. These are all considered effective instructional strategies.

However, in the same classrooms where effective language-learning techniques were applied, many of the tasks assigned to the students did not appear to be age/grade appropriate or academically demanding. For example, students were asked to draw pictures and write the names of animals they had seen during a class visit to the zoo. Moreover, in a few of the ESL classrooms observed, students spent a significant amount of classroom time doing independent seatwork, rather than practicing and using the second language.

These nondemanding practices have been found to have negative effects student's motivation for learning generally and on second-language learning, in particular. Wong-Fillmore, Ammon, McLaughlin, and Ammon (1985) found that Hispanic students acquire English most readily when their teachers use it for talking about subject matter that is intellectually challenging and meaningful to them. Other researchers have noted that successful learning of the second language requires frequent opportunities for extended discourse in the target language (Genesee, 1994; Wong-

Fillmore, 1989). These opportunities were not available in the ESL classrooms observed. For example, after explaining the task of the day, teachers asked students to work in small groups. While the teacher worked with one small group, the remaining students worked individually—and few were interacting among themselves. This response by the students could have been a function of poor preparation for small-group work, or the lack of models to provide the linguistic input in the second language. In these classrooms, the teacher was the only fully proficient English speaker in the class. Thus, even if students were effectively prepared for small-group work, there was limited communication among students in the second language since they were all at the same beginning level of second-language development.

As second-language learners gain competence in English-language skills, they are more likely to gain greater access to content knowledge.

Several reports have found that providing second-language learners with access to the core curriculum content is one of the greatest challenges faced by both middle and high schools.[9] It is particularly difficult in schools where students don't have the option of receiving content instruction in the native language. In such cases, students must wait until they have reached a threshold level of English proficiency to access the full curriculum offerings. At the classroom level, the challenge is how to combine content and language. More specifically, teachers must communicate ideas (concepts, knowledge) in ways that are comprehensible to the students. To accomplish this task, they not only modify language but make decisions about how much of the content their students can grasp. This dilemma exists regardless of the quality of the content available to students.

Discussions with the teachers and observations of the tasks assigned to students indicate that many Vista students with

LEP—particularly those at the beginning levels of ESL—are not receiving the same curriculum content as their English-speaking peers. Although the ESL curriculum has a social studies content, the content is not aligned with the state/district mandated curriculum in these subject areas. To provide students with LEP with access to the core curriculum offerings, teachers must teach the same content and use the same materials (standard social studies/history/science text) that they use with English-speaking students. Because the content is not available in the primary language and the mandated core curriculum materials are beyond the students' English-language reading level, there is limited access to the content at the beginning levels of English-language learning. Thus, most of these students must wait for a period of at least two years to gain access to the core curriculum.[10] This delay particularly affects students entering the school without previous schooling in the United States.

Social studies and history teachers at the beginning and intermediate levels of ESL seem to have the greatest difficulty in providing content (curriculum) at the appropriate grade-level expectation. For these teachers, the lack of content is a source of great frustration. As a result, some teachers want to disregard the district-prescribed curriculum altogether, and focus primarily on teaching of English-language basic skills in an attempt to quickly move students through the ESL sequence. The following comment was shared by most members of a sixth-grade team:

> We have to connect these kids sometimes, and we can't do that with what we have. It's unrealistic, I think. We all agree—the material, the curriculum, doesn't reach the kids where they are. It does not mean much in their lives.

The issue is not lack of "cultural relevance" in the curriculum. Instead, it is the belief among teachers that there is too much emphasis on content:

> We can't pretend they're up here and not deal with the basic skills issue. Once they get them, probably half of all of our classes could be college bound, but not if we don't address the needs of where they are right now. We should not assume in sixth grade that we are college preparatory and that we need to fill their heads with all these places and dates. They need to learn to read and they need to learn to write, and we should be doing that all day.

These comments do not negate teachers' attempts to teach the core curriculum content. But because they cannot use the state-approved textbooks or materials with students with LEP, they tend to emphasize basic language skills. Teachers at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels were also concerned with the difficulty of delivering content to the beginning ESL students. For example, one seventh-grade teacher said, "I got them a few weeks ago, so we (the team) are kind of muddling through right now."

Since there is no "sheltered" curriculum, some teachers have opted to write their own curriculums. Although teachers should be commended for attempting to respond creatively to the perceived needs of students with LEP, this option is problematic because it can result in curriculums that are too elementary and can lead to the lowering of standards for second-language learners.

At the upper level of the ESL sequence (ESL 5/6, Bridge), the opportunities for getting access to content knowledge have increased. At this level, sheltered content instruction is recommended because students have reached a threshold level of English-language fluency. Teachers who are teaching content to students at the 5/6 and Bridging levels of ESL feel more confident in their ability to design lessons and use materials available in English. As one teacher noted when referring to the 5-6/Bridge students, "I knew they would be

fairly fluent in reading and writing, and I could do some of the things." This teacher explained how she works with students at this level: "I use a lot of manipulatives and a lot of visuals, but I'm not simplifying that much at this level." Another teacher talked about her initial frustrations in identifying materials:

> I think I finally got a book that they can understand and that they are somewhat interested in. They've pretty much read the whole textbook, so they're done with all the stories that were in the scope of textbooks.

The impact of second-language learners in mainstream classrooms is less apparent to the teachers.

Mainstream teachers were less likely to feel that second-language learners had any impact on how much content the teachers covered. They felt that in their classroom all students had access to the same content. Frequently, these teachers emphasized their belief that it was preferable to teach less content (to all students) in a much deeper and interconnected manner than to cover more chapters superficially. The strategy to focus on thematic units of instruction, coupled with the interdisciplinary structure, has facilitated the design of learning experiences that tap into the students' "multiple intelligences." Teachers exhibited enthusiasm when they talked about interdisciplinary teaching units, simulations, and the benefits of these approaches on student learning. One eighth-grade science teacher talked about an interdisciplinary unit focused on bridges:

> So we teach bridges; not only do they go to visit bridges, go under bridges, and learn about the Brooklyn Bridge, but in my class they built and tested a bridge.

During the discussion, teachers gave many other examples of activities and approaches that they use to deepen a

student's understanding of content. These approaches included small-group experiments in science classes, more writing and problem-solving activities in math classes, the use of manipulatives, and hands-on approaches.

In the mainstream classrooms, teachers were concerned about whether students are able to meet the teachers' grade-level standards. Several questions were asked about students' ability to meet these standards and to what extent language continues to be an influential factor. As was true with many of the other issues explored, teachers expressed some ambivalence across interdisciplinary teams about the role of language in mainstream classes. One seventh-grade team felt that language was not a factor they needed to consider in their classrooms:

> We don't look at them as a second language group. If they're with us, they have jumped the hoop, granted a lot of them are low end [performance spectrum].

The assumption made by these teachers is that once the student with LEP is mainstreamed, he or she should be able to handle the linguistic load of the mainstream class. However, the language-development needs of second-language learners affect the students' ability to meet grade-level standards in the subject areas. Students need additional English-language development support because two or three years is not enough time for most students to become proficient in a second language. Some of the mainstream teachers acknowledged the students' difficulties. For example, an eighth-grade teacher noted that half her students still lack English proficiency in reading and that she therefore does not use the literature textbook every day. Instead, she uses it as a reference book.[11] Two other teachers on the eighth-grade team talked about the "amazing research" students had done for their history projects, and about the quality of the students' experiments in science, but were disappointed that the projects could not be submitted for competitions be-

cause of the students' writing deficiencies. Lack of support in the mainstream class results in frustration for the students as well. As one ESL teacher noted:

> They [students] become behavior problems. Kids act out when they are at a constant frustration level. Teachers [mainstream] think because kids can talk in English that they got it, but they don't know enough to know that the kids can't understand their homework assignments.

Nonetheless, some teachers in mainstream classrooms try to accommodate second-language learners: Teachers incorporate more reading and writing tasks in their classroom activities; separate language issues from content, to judge students' work on the basis on what they know, not the students' reading and writing skills; give students an opportunity to show what they know visually, not just in writing; and reduce the amount of homework assignments that require reading.

Where language does not seem to be an issue is in students' ability to access content in mathematics. This observation holds across grade levels, but primarily for teachers at the upper level of the ESL sequence and in the mainstream classrooms. One eighth-grade teacher said that although she finds herself talking, writing, and explaining more, she can use the math textbook and has not skipped much of the content. This finding is consistent with the overall, national pattern of performance of students with LEP—achievement is higher in math than in other subject areas. Students' success in math is partly attributed to the way mathematics has been taught—with a focus on teaching computational procedures. However, new trends in mathematics instruction and assessment of student learning will likely change this pattern. In many states and localities, students will be assessed for understanding of more complex math concepts and skills, including more word problem tasks on the as-

sessment procedures. Thus, teachers of second-language learners will be compelled to focus on the role of language in math instruction.

Students in the GATE/Seminar classes (students with high achievement levels) have greater access to challenging content.

Perhaps the greatest difference in terms of access to more challenging content is not the difference between second-language learners in mainstream classes and their English-speaking peers, but the difference between students in GATE and Seminar classrooms and students in the "regular" classrooms.[12] Descriptions of what teachers do in these classes indicate that students receive a differential and perhaps unequal instructional experience. According to the teachers, students in GATE and Seminar classes move through the curriculum at a faster pace, have access to more challenging materials, and become more deeply involved with the content.

This issue was one of the topics that generated the most fervent discussion among the teachers interviewed. Almost all agreed with the notion that the Seminar students needed special attention. Teachers had differing opinions, however, on the question of the need and impact of the GATE classes. Those in support of these classes, the Seminar/GATE teachers, felt that these students needed to interact with other bright students, and that in regular classes they are not sufficiently challenged. Those opposed, who were in the majority, asserted that when the more talented students are pulled out of the regular class, these classrooms are left with less-motivated students, including many of the second-language learners. Also, in regular classes, students are left without leadership or role models. Math teachers saw some merit in tracking within their discipline. All teachers agreed that the main barrier against detracking are the parents of the students in the GATE classes.

Not all teachers believed that tracking was a harmful practice at Vista. They noted that the ability range in the regular classes was still wide, and that the GATE classes were representative of all ethnic and language groups of the school:

> You can visit our GATE program, which is not all majority kids at all. It's not all white kids. It's quite a mixture. So we are not detracking, we are keeping some of our GATE classes. We're keeping our GATE program together because it's not a racial issue or a discrimination issue. It's a way for the brightest and the best kids to get advanced sort of help in thinking about going to college.

Moreover, staff noted that students in regular classrooms are encouraged to take advanced-level courses through a school-college collaborative effort designed to increase the number of non-GATE students attending college.

Assessment practices vary across classrooms.

Educators working with second-language learners are generally dissatisfied with the types of instruments and assessment practices used to measure students' knowledge of content and of the second-language acquisition. Several experts have noted that instruments used to measure language development are not grounded in second-language theory and that tests attempting to measure the second-language learners' content knowledge are really measuring English-language ability. It is unrealistic to expect the staff at Vista to have resolved the difficult problems that confound the process of assessing second-language learners. Recognizing these difficulties, the district and the school are participating with several national projects whose objective is to develop alternative assessments in several subject areas.

Teachers' responses regarding what they do in the area of assessment have implications for schoolwide improvement efforts and for teaching and learning. In eliciting teachers'

comments on assessment, we were interested in identifying the types of assessment practices teachers use to measure students' academic growth and language development over time; and we wanted to gain an understanding of how teachers applied alternative assessments. The open-ended format of this question generated a variety of responses.

While it appears that most teachers use traditional methods of assessment, efforts are underway to use more authentic means of determining what students know. Several teachers (including ESL teachers) are working with the Performance Assessment Collaborative for Education (PACE) project, which is training teachers to use embedded performance assessments and portfolios to assess students' learning in the content area. Although teachers talked about having student portfolios, it was not clear what level of ESL classrooms use them, whether they measure progress in second-language learning or content, or whether they are aligned to instructional practices. The process of adapting new ways of assessing what students know comes with some level of frustration, as articulated by this eighth-grade ESL Bridge teacher:

> I know we've been told a lot about alternative assessment, and we have our portfolios. But it's still hard to see what's really getting through and what's not. I feel like I'm really struggling, but I'm sure some days are always better than others—and today was really hard.

Even when innovative assessment practices are used with students with LEP, and the assessments are in English, results don't always give teachers the information they need. The language of assessment is an issue because teachers may arrive at erroneous conclusions based on the results of an English-language test. For example, when asked about her students' performance in class, a sixth-grade mainstream teacher said:

> Especially if we're delving into poetry and things like that, it's more difficult for them to pick out the symbolism. They are much more handicapped in working with that. I find that they need more help in that area than kids who have just grown up hearing the language.

In this case, the results reinforce perceived notions about students' weaknesses. Had the second-language learner had the opportunity to demonstrate learning in the dominant language, the performance might have been different. Some teachers noted that they don't use the tests that are aligned with the curriculum and instead construct their own tests.[13] This approach may be reasonable depending on the standards against which student performance is measured, and if all students are held to the same standards.

When asked what factors are considered in determining students' classroom grades, several teachers noted that they consider effort, hard work, and participation. Teachers also indicated that there is flexibility in how second-language learners perform and demonstrate knowledge during the assessment process. For example, some teachers allow certain mediation steps: Students can use their classroom notes (with some points taken off), and teachers give open-book quizzes.

Beyond knowing about assessment practices and criteria for determining grades, we were interested in teachers' understanding the performance of second-language learners schoolwide. Responses indicate that the teachers' understanding of how well students perform depends on the source of information and the subject area. If an external measure is used (reading scores), then the second-language learners are performing below grade level.[14] However, if teachers use in-classroom grades as indicators of classroom performance, then many second-language learners are achieving at a higher

level than the "regular students." As evidence, some teachers pointed to the number of awards won by the second-language learners, most of whom were of Asian-language background. In referring to student performance, one teacher noted:

> I think the core knowledge for some of the ESL students is far superior. It is the linguistic barrier that is keeping them back, where they are very bright in their native language.

It is not clear how teachers arrived at this judgment, because the school provided neither instruction nor assessment in the primary language. As previously indicated, math teachers thought that second-language learners performed as well as their "regular kids." A few teachers talked about individual students who had excelled in high school or college. As a group, however, teachers had no knowledge of how well students were performing at the high school level. One department chair was aware that the high school had convened a meeting of their feeder schools. Therefore, she concluded: "My suspicion is that they [the students] are not meeting the [high school expectations], and that's why the principals have decided that something needs to be addressed."

There is no visible recognition of the strengths that second-language learners bring to the classroom.

Students at Vista arrive at the school not as blank slates, but as young people with prior linguistic, cultural, and experiential knowledge that might be incorporated into the instructional experience. The students' primary language, in particular, can be used to convey meaningful content information, elevate student learning, and promote participation in classroom activities. The instructional design and staffing pattern at Vista prevents the staff from tapping into the linguistic knowledge of the students, even

though some classrooms incorporate primary languages. For example, in some classrooms, students at the beginning of the ESL sequence use their primary language when talking among themselves, to ask questions of the teacher, and to help one another during small-group work. These efforts to use primary languages are commendable, though they are not teacher initiated and are inconsistent. Consequently, the impact on student learning is limited.

In an effort to gain insight about the teachers' and staff perception of primary language instruction in the content areas, we asked ESL teachers to discuss their views regarding primary-language instruction. None of the teachers had strong opposition to primary-language instruction. Teachers who were the most supportive of this concept taught students at the beginning of the ESL sequence. For example, in one of the eighth-grade teams, a teacher noted that "theory and statistics and tests...prove time and time again, it's best that they learn in their native language."

Others thought that teaching in the primary language was not a viable option for several reasons: there are few certified bilingual teachers; there is no money to hire those who are certified; some bilingual teachers have weak content knowledge; and it was unfair to provide this option to only a segment of the population (Spanish speakers) and not all other non-English-language speakers.

Similar to the language issue, the cultural background and experiences of the students are important in the instructional process. Studies of effective school characteristics have concluded that schools that are successful with culturally diverse populations incorporate aspects of the students' cultural heritage into the life of the school and the teaching and learning process (Lucas, 1992). At Vista, one teacher mentioned that he uses multicultural literature in his language arts class; but most responses reflected a different message: The cultural heritage of the students is not openly recognized as a

resource for enrichment. Teachers' references to cultural diversity were almost always made in the context of the problem that it presents to the school, rather than its possibilities. The emphasis at Vista seems to be on getting the students to assimilate to the dominant culture. This message is not explicit, or willful. Instead, it is the absence of visual representation of students' cultural backgrounds in the classrooms, in the curriculum, and in the interaction process that leads to this observation.

Teacher and staff perceptions about the marginal or "regular student" tend to be negative.

A safe and orderly environment is a prerequisite for learning. The staff and teachers at Vista have established a safe and orderly environment for its students. During the visits, there were no instances of violent altercation among students; and when minor disagreements surfaced, the staff responded quickly and efficiently to resolve the situation. Teachers believe that over the years the behavior problems in and out of class have declined substantially. They attribute this improvement to a number of factors: an assertive discipline program; teacher's contact with parents; timeout rooms; field trips; and, as a last resort, the "opportunity classroom."

The opportunity classroom is an attempt by the school to give at-risk students a last chance to meet the academic expectations of their subject-area classrooms. This is a half-day, self-contained class during which a teacher/counselor works with students who are at risk of dropping out. The teacher works with students to strengthen their academic skills and to promote changes in behavior. Students who meet the expectations set by the opportunity classroom teacher return to their regular academic classes after a specified period of time. These strategies seem to work well for the school.

Nonetheless, teachers' perceptions of the marginal or "regular" students were discouraging. Teachers describe these students as disruptive in class, lacking motivation to learn, and generally performing poorly. Further, teachers describe them as not willing to work hard enough and as coming from home environments that were not as supportive of the school's goals. When asked to identify the "regular students," teachers noted that they are generally the native-born students or those language-minority students who had become "Americanized." It is likely that some of these students are the same students that were viewed very positively by the school staff prior to the students' acculturation to their new American culture. Thus, though teachers and staff wanted the new arrivals to become "American," they seemed to disapprove of the behavior exhibited by the acculturated students—perhaps because the cultural norms or patterns of behaviors that second-language learners were emulating were those of the "low-status," low-income students.

Students at the beginning levels of ESL were not receiving career counseling or explorations services.

One of the expected outcomes of middle school reform efforts is that students gain an understanding of how different curriculums affect their career and post-secondary school options. Career-counseling services at Vista are designed to provide students with opportunities to explore future career choices. One mechanism is to visit classrooms where students complete a career entrance survey. The results of the survey are used to guide the students' explorations of careers. Students do this by reading career resource materials and completing worksheets focusing on specific jobs. There is also a career wheel (a special class) taught by the career counselor (and other teachers) in which students explore topics such as occupational knowledge, job search, job application, and occupational interests. Unfortunately, these

opportunities are available only to students at the upper end of the ESL sequence and to English-dominant students. Materials are not available in any of the minority languages, nor are aides or support personnel available to translate some of the information for the students. Thus, it is conceivable that students who do not reach the upper level of the ESL sequence while in attendance at Vista, have no opportunity to explore the various career options. Although ESL teachers provide this information to second-language learners, it does not appear to be a structured effort, but an attempt to compensate for services not provided elsewhere.

Parents have been incorporated into the life of the school in a variety of ways.

Support from the Chapter 1 program, a family education program, and the leadership of the school has created a welcoming environment for parents. All parents interviewed were pleased with their interactions with the school personnel and felt that the leadership valued their presence and contribution to the school. Parents are engaged in many activities designed to support several school objectives. They function as translators, supervise the lunch period, help with chores such as painting classrooms and exterior walls of the school, and monitor the school hallways during class time. These activities are coordinated by a parent coordinator who has an office in the parent center. At the center, parents hold meetings or relax with a cup of coffee as they wait for the next assignment.

Other activities that involve parents include parenting classes and the SHARE program.[15] Future plans include ESL classes for parents. Parent activities are held in the native language of the families. Although parents seem to function primarily as "helpers," there is a mechanism for communicating their concerns to the leadership of the school. They hold quarterly meetings with the principal, and minutes of the parents' monthly meetings are shared with the school leadership.

We were unable to ascertain the level of parent involvement with issues of teaching and learning. Parents generally did not express concerns about the school's provision of educational services to their children. Perhaps many shared the perspective of the Cambodian aide, who said:

> Cambodian people don't make a judgment about things that they are not familiar with. In their country, they leave everything up to the school. They come to the understanding they have some voice, but to them they have to be educated to some degree to be able to say that the school is not teaching my kids. They value education, and they want their kids to come to school every day to get education.

This perspective, however, may not be shared by all of the Cambodian parents. A subgroup of the community wants to see more Cambodian teachers or instructional aides at the school, given the size of the Cambodian population.[16] This group also expressed interest in primary-language instruction in math and science. All parents interviewed are concerned about gangs outside of the school, and thought that the adoption of a school uniform policy might reduce this problem. Also, the representative of the Vietnamese parents stressed the desire of this community to have primary-language instruction, not as a "remedial strategy," but as a means of helping to maintain language and cultural ties with the community.

Teachers' perceptions about parent involvement or lack of involvement were not surprising. Some comments reflected an understanding of the difficulties that low-income immigrant families face, while others showed frustration with lack of parent support. Teachers conceded that overall relations with parents had improved in recent years as a result of the work of the parent center. Many teachers, however, felt that parents were not as supportive of the schools' effort as they should be, and that efforts to involve parents must continue. They noted that

parents are overwhelmed with personal problems that interfere with their ability to be more supportive.

Teachers were frustrated with parents' lack of responsiveness when asked to meet with teachers to discuss disciplinary, attendance, or academic performance problems. As in the discussion about second-language learners and "regular" students, teachers distinguished between immigrant families and nonimmigrant families. They believe that immigrant families value education more so than others.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to examine how a middle school undergoing restructuring attempted to meet the instructional needs of second-language learners. Although the primary focus of the study was on the school's services to second-language learners, we have also made observations about the impact of restructuring efforts. The findings have implications at the classroom level and in terms of broad-based school reform.

Teachers were enthusiastic about the benefits that the middle school restructuring efforts and the school-based management approach had brought to the school. These efforts included interdisciplinary teaming, common preparation and planning periods, greater decision making in the types of staff development activities teachers participated in, and small-group work. In addition, teachers talked about innovative instructional practices and how they were applied in the classroom. For example, teachers stated that they focused less on "covering" content and emphasized more in-depth explorations of limited content material. Teachers stated that they were applying the theory of multiple intelligences to meet the needs of various types of learners; and they were using second-language teaching techniques in all classrooms to make instruction more comprehensible to students. These practices created positive conditions for learning. If middle-level reform efforts are to result in positive achievement outcomes for second-language learners, however, teachers and staff must consider the particular needs and strengths of these students during each phase of the reform process.

Most teachers expressed positive feelings towards second-language learners. However, some were ambivalent about these students' level of educational attainment, given the students' lack of proficiency in English and their home backgrounds. When comparing second-language learners to

the marginal or "regular" students, staff seemed to have higher expectations of the second-language learners. The degree to which this perception or bias in favor of the newly arrived second-language learners and their families is communicated to the "regular student" could not be determined in this study. However, if the message is communicated consciously (or unconsciously) to the students, it can heighten interethnic tensions, which can surface in schools like Vista undergoing rapid demographic transition.

The study found ambivalence about the mission or goal of middle-level education. Teachers who perceive their primary mission as assisting students in working through the socioemotional challenges of early adolescence are less likely to demand high levels of academic achievement. Given the broader school reform efforts at the district and national levels, teachers need to place more emphasis on the academic achievement goals of middle-level education if second-language students are to have opportunities to meet the high expectations articulated in the national education goals and state content and performance standards. We found it difficult to ascertain whether the teachers' views on the goals of middle-level education had any impact on the content covered in their classrooms or on interactions with their students.

The school offers its students a coordinated, well-sequenced English-language development program. All ESL teachers and many mainstream teachers have been trained to modify delivery of content to make it more understandable to second-language learners. Observations of some of the beginning-level ESL classrooms, however, indicated that teachers assigned tasks that were not age/grade appropriate. This practice has negative effects on the language-learning process. Experts in second-language teaching assert that students get little out of instruction when the tasks are nondemanding (Wong-Fillmore, 1989). Moreover, because

teachers provide content instruction in English, students's access to the content area depends on their English-language competence. Those at the upper level of the ESL sequence have greater opportunity to access the core curriculum content. This situation places second-language learners at risk of academic failure because they lack the depth in content knowledge already acquired by their English-dominant peers, and at the same time meet the linguistic demands of the English-only classroom. Notwithstanding language background, students placed in Seminar/GATE classes have a more engaging instructional experience than do students in the regular classes.

Despite attempts to make instruction more meaningful by modifying how content is taught to accommodate different learning styles, the school staff had not embraced the notion of a culturally inclusive education. The staff viewed cultural diversity more as a problem than as an opportunity.

Finally, the school has established mechanisms for incorporating parents into the life of the school. Although the role of parents appears to be primarily that of "helpers," they are visible throughout the school and provide important services. Also, parents have formal mechanisms for communicating concerns and desires to the school leadership. The administrative staff were more likely to have positive comments about the level of parent involvement than were some of the classroom teachers. It is not clear why this was the case. It may be that teachers and administrators have difference expectations of parents. This issue merits additional research.

Recommendations for Schools and Districts

Although the following recommendations are based on the analysis of a single case study, I believe they will be helpful to other middle schools with similar student populations and with similar reform efforts in place.

- **Districts need to exert a stronger leadership role in schools with limited experience serving second-language learners.** This is particularly the case for schools moving into school-based management governance structures. As schools try to figure out "what works" with second-language learners, districts need to work closely with the schools to assist them in decision making. Staffs in these schools often do not know how to adapt their overall school reform initiative to specific student populations, or believe that broad-based reform by itself can produce the higher achievement outcomes desired. The absence of district leadership could have unintended negative consequences for second-language learners. District staff can be instrumental in facilitating the discussion among schools in the process of implementing reform efforts.

- **Middle schools with significant numbers of second-language learners should offer content courses in the primary language.** Primary language instruction in social studies courses and in science is desirable for students who are at the beginning of the English language learning sequence. It is at this point in their schooling that second language learners are most at risk of falling behind in learning content matter when the content is taught in English.

  Where primary-language instruction is not feasible, the central office should work diligently to identify aides who can work in the classroom *under the supervision of the teacher* to mediate content instruction. In addition, the aides should be trained to ensure that they have a good grasp of content.

- **Districts should set aside funding for the purchase or development of age-appropriate, high-quality, culturally relevant materials for middle-level second-language learners.** The materials should be aligned with the state curriculum frameworks and district curriculum content. Lack of quality materials was one of the frustrations most frequently cited by teachers. Other areas cited included in-classroom aides, smaller classes, more planning and staff development time, more support in the language arts area, and high-quality inservice training focused on language development. These needs are probably not unique to the school visited for this case study.

- **Districts and schools should expand their staff development efforts to include topics designed to produce results in classrooms with second-language learners.** For example, staff development focused on language development should be provided to all teachers in schools with large numbers of second-language learners and speakers of nonstandard English. Teachers who had received such training noted that they had acquired a greater sense of efficacy and confidence in their work with second-language learners, as well as other students in their classrooms.

- **Districts considering the development of a "sheltered curriculum" should clarify how this "curriculum" is aligned to the content standards and the district mandated curriculum.** At the middle and high school levels, content instruction is provided to second-language learners through sheltered content, or content that is tailored specifically for students with special needs, such as bilingual programs. Many of the teachers interviewed talked about the school's need for a "sheltered curriculum" to make instruction more accessible to second-language learners. Few teachers, however, were able to outline how it will differ from the district-mandated curriculum that is taught to other students. This issue is important in light of the national discussion

about development of content standards that apply to all students, including students with LEP. Would a sheltered curriculum encourage the development of a different set of standards for students with LEP?

- **Middle school leadership should consider placing the more experienced teachers in those classrooms where students have the greatest needs.** During the interviews, several ESL teachers indicated that they specifically asked to work with a particular group of students with LEP. These were invariably not the students at the beginning of the ESL sequence. Though teachers' desires must be considered, the leadership needs to weigh the probable impact of these decisions on the students. When the beginner class is assigned to a beginner ESL teacher whose inexperience is not compensated by *bilingual skills*, then valuable instructional time is lost as the teacher learns to work with students with special needs.

- **Middle schools should design culturally responsive classroom environments for their students.** Creating a more "culturally responsive" instructional environment is not a sufficient requirement for students to meet high academic expectations. However, the academic achievement of these students will be enriched when their cultural traditions and life experiences are recognized and valued. Strong arguments and some empirical evidence show that infusion of multicultural concepts makes a difference in expanding the knowledge base of all students, reducing interethnic conflict, and making the instructional experience more meaningful to students. This latter issue is not irrelevant, given "constructivist" notions of how learning takes place. As cognitive psychologists have noted, "Learning is the act of linking new information with prior knowledge" (Palincsar & Brown, 1987).

Moreover, researchers who have examined student-teacher verbal and nonverbal communications have concluded that these behaviors are culturally patterned. Knowledge of the cultural patterns that affect classroom interactions can be used to improve educational outcomes for culturally diverse students.

Finally, many groups are currently developing a great deal of curriculum materials in the area of multicultural education. Teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel.

- **Middle schools experimenting with performance assessments should establish ongoing, long-term relationships with experts that can provide technical support regarding portfolio assessments and second-language learners.** In their review of portfolios, the staff need to be sure that the portfolios reflect and value the second-language acquisition process. In addition, once standards are articulated for all students, the staff should identify what good performance looks like for second-language learners, what mediation procedures teachers have to consider, and how they will address mediation in future assessments of second-language learners. More generally, the portfolios must reflect the instructional practices of the classroom.

- **Schools should use after-school hours to offer extra assistance to LEP Students.** In collaboration with other groups, schools can extend the school day beyond the normal six-hour school schedule. For example, this segment of the school day can be used to work with students in need of specific and targeted help: Asian students in need of intensive work in learning English grammatical structure; second-language learners in the mainstream whose literacy skills are not on grade level; and students who lack literacy in the primary language and come to school with specific health and social needs.

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Footnotes

[1] Limited English proficiency (LEP) is a classification given to students once they have been tested to determine the level of English-language competency. Students who score below a certain cutoff point on an English-language proficiency test are given the LEP classification and are eligible to receive specialized English-language instruction, called English as a second language (ESL). Students characterized as fully English proficient (FEP) are students formerly classified with LEP who have been reclassified and placed in English-only (EO) classrooms. Schools use the results of English-language and academic achievement tests to make decisions about placement of students in English-only classrooms. *Second-language learners* is a term used to describe students characterized as both LEP and FEP.

[2] See U.S. Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs. (1992). *Proceedings of the Third National Research Symposium on LEP Student Issues: Focus on Middle and High School Issues.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

[3] Goals 2000: Educate America Act, Improving American Schools Act and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act each require that all students, including those with LEP, meet challenging academic and skill standards.

[4] Middle level reform efforts currently being implemented across the nation have been stimulated by the Carnegie Corporation's seminal work titled "Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century." This report was published by the Carnegie Corporation's Council on Adolescent Development and was released in June 1989.

[5] Vista Middle School is a fictitious name.

[6] Sheltered instruction provides students with LEP with content instruction in a second-language-learning classroom environment. In these classrooms, language is modified through the use of techniques such as amplification, repetition, and organizers (visuals).

[7] Generally, students in mainstream classrooms would not be the recent arrivals (less than 3 years). These students are in the process of acculturation to the American culture, which forsome means adopting modes of behavior and interaction common to their American peers.

[8] State requirements specify that teachers teaching students with LEP must either have the Language Development Specialist (LDS) certificate or be working toward it.

[9] In this study, core curriculum subjects are math, social studies, science, and English language arts.

[10] Since the data were collected in February 1994, the schools has modified the master schedule to accommodate a bilingual (Spanish) science class. The school staff has requested a teacher for this class from the central office.

[11] The students' difficulty in reading the text was cited repeatedly by many of the teachers interviewed, regardless of the type of class they taught (ESL, mainstream).

[12] Students in the Seminar classes are those who received the highest score on an IQ test. GATE classes are composed of students who scored slightly lower than the Seminar students. The school considers other factors (classroom grades) in the GATE placement criteria.

[13] This type of response is likely to come from teachers who teach students in the beginning ESL classes.

[14] Teachers in the regular mainstream classes pointed out that most of their students are below grade level. Second-language learners in these classes, however, may have low achievement levels for reasons that differ from those of their English-speaking peers.

[15] The SHARE program is a collaborative project of the school, a Parent Education Group, and a religious organization. In this project, parents receive two boxes of groceries in return for two hours of work at the school and a small monetary contribution.

[16] About 300 Cambodian students are enrolled at Vista Middle School.